

Authorities of Representation: Speaking To and Speaking For. A Response to Barbara Korte*

LISA LAU and ANA CRISTINA MENDES

Barbara Korte's article focuses on representations of poverty in literary studies within the conceptual framework of postcolonialism. It highlights the division between the global North and South in terms of how poverty is positioned; through an investigation of two texts—Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Vikas Swarup's *Q & A*—Korte discusses the authenticity of the protagonists' voices and the literary devices this authenticity or lack of authenticity represents. She argues that the postcolonial context destabilises preconceptions about the poor and that these texts speak to readers outside India as well as to Indian cultural elite. Korte contends there are controversial and challenging representations of poverty emerging, and discusses the narrative voice which endows the indigent with agency, articulation and assertiveness.

There are a number of issues that can be further unpacked from Korte's thought-provoking article. From the beginning, Korte ponders the representation of people in poverty, and in her two chosen case studies, she notes that this representation is by writers who themselves are from the cultural elite. The whole issue of representation in Indian Writing in English (IWE) is one fraught with stumbling blocks, but key to postcolonial studies.¹ At the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been increasing interest in what could broadly be termed "Dark India," the counterpart to India Shining.

*Reference: Barbara Korte, "Can the Indigent Speak? Poverty Studies, the Postcolonial and Global Appeal of *Q & A* and *The White Tiger*," *Connotations* 20.2-3 (2010/11): 293-312.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debkorte02023.htm>>.

More IWE, Indian films, and representations of India of all kinds have focused their attention on the underbelly of India, the slums, the destitution, the crime, and the inequalities. There has been a rise of fiction depicting poverty and servitude, written from the viewpoints of servants, labourers, the exploited, the blue collar workers, and slum-dwellers, and these have been by writers both living within India, as well as the diasporic Indian writers.

The authority of such representation is clearly problematic in many texts—particularly in those written about the working and lower classes, who themselves do not necessarily (and are unlikely to) read and write in English. English as a choice of writing language is itself controversial when used to “represent” or “present” stories about subalterns; it is a language which the subjects of discussion can hardly access, let alone represent themselves in. So since the learning of English in India is still largely confined to the middle classes, the elite, and the urban, presentation and representation of the working classes and the poor would invariably be by those who are *not* members of these groups, and not people authorised by these groups to speak on their behalf.

Korte does nod towards subalternism, and in her (perhaps rather brief) section on “Listening to the Indigent,” she argues that certain narratives are challenging societal preconceptions about poverty. Korte draws on Mendes’s 2010 article which suggests the strategic unreliability of the narrator in such narratives is a deliberate staging of an inauthentic Dark India. This subversive strategy may be intended by these authors of the cultural elite to draw attention to their own positionalities relative to their subject matter, and in this sense, pull the rug from under their own feet, subverting the traditional reader reliance on an omniscient narrator by indicating that this representation should *not* be regarded as a truth claim. It is a clever authorial method of addressing the thorny issue of authority and speaking for “others” by disclaiming authority even as the reader confers it, thereby side-stepping the even thornier issue of *authenticity*.

By the end of the twentieth century, authenticity had become the elephant in the room for IWE. The notion of the ethnic literary output by third world writers being regarded as anthropological text that contains truth claims has been a problem which has long plagued postcolonial writers (some of whom justifiably resist this very label) and which has plagued the social-realism novel in particular. As Amireh and Majaj have argued, “[g]iven the key role of literary intermediaries in shaping the content as well as form of the canon of ‘Third World literature’ available in the West, it is clear that the view of Third World women’s texts as providing unmediated glimpses into ‘Other’ cultures is not only naïve, but also high problematic” (5). This of course applies not only to women’s texts, but any by third world and/or ethnic minority writers read by a Western audience.

In realist terms, the point of a novel mirroring the world objectively is that it should, “through this impersonal mirroring, show ‘truth’” (Lee 11), but within a postcolonial framework, it is very clear how problematic and contested this “truth” can be given the problems with both authority and authenticity of representation. Realism in IWE has long been both its strength and yet paradoxically, simultaneously, its Achilles heel. Indian authors writing in English have been constricted by the pressure as well as promoted by the privilege of being representatives or emissaries of their race and nation.

Moreover, as Lau had previously discussed in a re-Orientalist framework, having seized self-representation on the global (read English) literary stage, Indian authors have felt the need to set the record straight, to attempt to convey truthful facets of the India they are writing of, and to avoid the flawed, unrepresentative and inauthentic Orientalist accounts which had been imposed on them before. However, as re-orientalism theory notes, orientalism, even by writers of the Orient, is extremely difficult to refrain from, especially by writers who themselves are members of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s “comprador intelligentsia” (119) and who are themselves therefore embedded within the power hierarchy. Lau noted that accusations which can be levelled against IWE authors run into a fairly extensive list: ranging

from “exaggeration, typecasting, stereotyping, exoticizing, pandering to western tastes, demands and expectations, selling out, having mercenary motives, playing to the gallery, to more sophisticated misrepresentations of totalizing, essentializing, subalternism, marginalizing, and most recently of all, re-Orientalizing. All these are in some form or other critical of IWE for failing to represent faithfully and comprehensively, of being guilty of skewed, partial, and selective representation, or wilful misrepresentation altogether, and at worst, outright betrayal” (Lau 30).

However, in order to be granted a platform (i.e. a wide, possibly global distribution), an Indian writer working in English has to seize authority to some extent, and one straightforward method is by playing the “authenticity card,” and indeed, “concepts of ‘authentic’ identity continue to shape literary production and reception” (Karem 12). In questioning the ethics of speaking for the poor, Korte’s article moves the discussion from an orientalist to a re-Orientalist framework. Indeed, where poverty and representation is concerned, Korte’s article points to re-Orientalism in action: “The consumption of these works [literary works by postcolonial writers] helps to maintain a system of exploitation that was inaugurated by European colonialism and imperialism more than five hundred years ago” (Mukherjee 8).

In re-Orientalist currency, authenticity is validated by establishing identity and positionality. The anxiety over authenticity and the promotion of authenticity as a desirable element of literary narratives is in part driven by audiences in India and abroad who continue to regard IWE texts as containing truth claims, and judging their merit based on this criterion. Representation meanwhile, unavoidably continues to be highly selective, tempered, warped, skewed, and even distorted as it has to be, by a host of elite representatives, comprising academics, novelists, publishers, gatekeepers, cosmopolitans, expatriates, diasporics, media, and more. Perhaps it is all but inevitable, therefore, IWE and its authors simply have to continue enacting “the

commodification of exoticised Orientalism in global capitalist exchange" (Shivani 2).

On the point of capitalist exchange, it is necessary to also take into account the commodification of IWE as a product in cultural markets; poverty being both a marker of exotica as well as a best seller in the literary market. Graham Huggan's seminal work *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001) laid the foundation for the discussion of the global commodification of difference and otherness, and of course exoticism. Sarah Brouillette's (2007) siting of postcolonial literature and authors in the marketplace extended the discussion, and indeed, for the last decade, much academic attention has been accurately focused on the selection of postcolonial narratives by publishers, the promotion of select authors and genres, its media-and-publisher-mediated reader response, the role of international acclaim in the form of literary prizes, and the canonising of IWE texts selected by Western sanction (cf. Chakladar; Orsini; Bahri; Majumdar; Squires; Iyer and Zare; Phukan and Rajan, etc.).

As she highlights the issue of poverty as being opportunistically utilised, Korte's article joins in this debate, asking if literary treatments of poverty may be a fictional equivalent to slum tourism (295). Korte raises the intriguing point that poverty in literary narratives as a topic may well attract readers of the global North because it beguilingly suggests this is a topic which is at a comfortable distance from them, a problem which is a remote spectacle and not one which is on their own doorsteps. This then becomes a product which is attractive on the cultural market, exotic without being threatening, because "[m]arginality is chic" (Mukherjee 8).

Korte's article concludes with concern not only with the authority of the representation, but also with the intended audience and reception to such narratives. Audience reception and the marketing world of IWE is indeed vital, because access to IWE is far from open, equal, and equitable. Rebecca S. Duncan and Mendes observed how the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* was received largely positively in the West, but with outrage in India and by Indian diasporic critics who regarded the

exposure of Indian slums as a form of exploitation. Reception is thus divided between applauding the calling of attention to the serious issue of poverty in India, and the demeaning portrayal of India for sales and profits. It is a difficult tightrope for artists and authors to walk; while it is important not to exoticise poverty and thus exploit one's "authenticity" in order to sell, it is equally important not to shy away from directing the spotlight of attention onto the darker facets of India, and giving voice and hearing to those who have not been able to partake in India's economic boom and prosperity. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee has an excellent suggestion, that while marketing what is deemed as *exotica*, postcolonial writers can "make exoticism bite back" (8), which is to say that, even within the confines of re-Orientalism, Indian writers can utilise re-Orientalism discourse in order to deconstruct and subvert audience expectations of any India-made-easy.

Keele University
Staffordshire

NOTE

¹"IWE stands accused, by [Anis] Shivani and others, of selling out, reinforcing stereotypes, playing to the gallery, packing and trading pseudo-culture in return for easy profits, and at the more academic end of the argument, of misleading, misrepresenting, and of bad faith. IWE is also seen as betraying its postcolonial roots: 'far from the former empire writing, let alone striking back, this new fiction goes out of its way to avoid creating any sense of discomfort or awareness of historical complicity in its western audience' (Shivani 2006: 3). In short, IWE stands accused not only of Orientalism and re-Orientalism, but of having cowardly, mercenary, western-approval-seeking motives for so doing. Therefore, at a point in time when IWE is celebrated and in great demand, it is also tremendously controversial, simultaneously widely acclaimed and roundly derided" (Lau 27-28).

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